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ABSTRACT

Following up an earlier study exploring the composing processes of 14 "unskilled" college writers in English as a Second Language (ESL), six original subjects and their instructors were interviewed after the students passed a college writing assessment. Writing was assessed based on two writing samples: one done for another class and one on a specific topic and produced for the study. It was found that students had usually written at least two drafts of at-home assignments because of the time available, but none had chosen to ask for assistance. Dramatic changes were seen in the second study in the quantity of student writing, fluency, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions. Some unresolved problems of form were found in all papers. The differences in the writing strategies available to the students were less apparent in this study than in the earlier study. Most instructors expected students to demonstrate in writing that they had understood the material being studied and could use the information gained and actively contemplate it. Overall, instructors responded to what they perceived as the sophistication of thought, grasp of material, and care taken by students with the writing task. Some teachers felt the ESL students in their classes were as good or better writers than native English-speaking students, despite the second language problem. (MSE)

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Interviews with Students and Colleagues: What Can We Learn?

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Interviews with Students and Colleagues: What Can We Learn?

In spring 1984, I conducted a study to explore the composing processes of "unskilled" English as a Second Language (ESL) college writers (Brooks, 1987a). One finding was that the "unskilled" writers who had all been placed in the same ESL composition course were not equally "unskilled," but rather represented a range of skills in and knowledge of composing.

Overall, the less skilled writers in the study seemed to have had less experience, and less positive experience as writers and language users. One girl described herself as follows: "I'm caught in between; I'm not fully well developed neither language, French or English" (Brooks, 1987a, p. 6).

In contrast, the more skilled writers were usually confident of their abilities and able to measure themselves by comparing what they were doing in English to what they knew they were capable of in their first language. Describing how she was able to write despite difficulties, Norma said:

> I know that I have, without false modesty, a good deal of natural ability. I'm very concerned about responsibility since if I have to do something, okay I will do. I am a student. I came to school to have a diploma, to graduate, so before I came here, I knew that I was going to have homeworks to do. That's why even when I can't write, I just do it. (Brooks, 1987b, p. 6)

Consequently, I hypothesized there would be greater similarity among these writers after they had passed a college writing assessment test (Wiener, 1983) and gone into Freshman Composition and other mainstream courses requiring written papers or exams.

This paper focuses on some findings of a follow-up study (Brooks, 1987b) in which the composing processes of the ESL students who had passed the writing assessment test were examined

and compared to findings of the 1984 study of their composing, when the students had been labeled "unskilled." Specifically, the paper focuses on interviews with the students about papers written for other courses: their understanding of and approach to assignments, response to instructors' feedback, and ideas for revision. In addition, ideas of the students' instructors about the role of writing in their courses, intentions for the assignments students wrote, and reactions to the students' texts are discussed, and implications are included.

THE FALL 1986 STUDY

There had been fourteen students from eight countries in the first study (Brooks, 1987a); six were women and eight were men. The students' average age was 20 and the average length of time in the United States was four years. Using information gathered during the first study, I tried to contact each of the original fourteen students to request their participation in the follow-up study. I was able to interview six personally. (Three had left the college and were working; another had graduated and moved out of state. I was unable to contact four of the original participants at all.)

They met with me twice. During the first session, the students wrote on a topic related to an article I had sent them to read; I interviewed them afterward as to how they had composed the text produced.

Students did not write during the second session, but were interviewed as to what kinds of writing they had been doing and in which courses during the intervening period (1984-1986), how they perceived their development as writers, and how they had composed a text which they shared with me. This second text was a paper written recently (during the current or prior semester) for a professor in another course.

After meeting each student twice, I then arranged an appointment with the instructors for whom students had done written assignments, to gather the instructors' perceptions of the writers and their texts.

FINDINGS

Behavior

It is difficult to comment on students' behavior while they composed the papers written for other courses, since I did not

observe them writing, but two points seem worth mentioning. First, students had usually done at least two drafts because of the time available (these assignments were written at home). Yet, no writer had chosen to get help (except Sandy, whose sister mainly helped with some typing) either from a friend or family member or from the resources available at the college (professors, tutors or the Writing Center). Although some writers were confident of doing well on their own, others reported being pressed for time (other coursework or jobs) or uncomfortable, for example, about going to the Writing Center.

Texts

A lot of variation is seen in the papers which were written for non-ESL and non-English department courses. This is at least in part a natural consequence of assignments from different professors and courses. Some instructors had specified a length requirement (i.e., 2 pages or 5-7 pages, usually typed), while others had not. Furthermore, although all the assignments required writers to respond in one way or another to a "text" of some kind, these varied from an excerpt of Socrates' trial (4 pages) for a Classics course, to a classical music concert, to Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sanchez* (a 500-page book) for a cross-cultural studies course. Some comparisons can still be made.

Papers ranged from 338 to 1,843 words in length, with Sandy writing the longest text, since hers was one of two term papers submitted. (Sandy, who had been the least skilled writer in the earlier study, appears to have overcome her writing block to some extent.) The number of paragraphs and sentences varied considerably (3 to 20 and 13 to 124, respectively) because of the term papers included. It is worth noting that in each case it was Sandy who had written the greatest number of words, sentences and paragraphs—Sandy, who just two years ago had consistently written the least.

Quantity alone, of course, does not tell the whole story. Most of these writers have increased in fluency, vocabulary and idiomatic language during the past two years, except perhaps Kwong-Uie, who seems to have developed least in this respect and may have the least opportunity to use English. Nonetheless, all papers contained unresolved problems of form (language errors), whether done in front of me or at home for another instructor. To keep this in perspective, two points should be remembered: five of the seven have

passed Freshman Composition (and its exit proficiency exam) and none sought help with a text even when writing more than one draft. As Zamel (1983) also found, the writers usually focused attention and energy on content and organization and the ideas being expressed, and left editing for the last minute, if at all.

The assignments required students to react to a text; some allowed students to respond personally, while others forced them to deal only with the given text. Consequently, in this study, writers could not just relate personal experience, as some did in 1984, without connections to other sources or more abstract matters.

Papers participants had written often allowed for a mix of reading and personal experience or feelings: Norma's defense of Socrates, Rose's description of her niece in light of theories of child development, or Luc's and Kwong-Uie's responses to classical music concerts. They were usually able to demonstrate clearly and carefully what they had learned in class as well as what they felt or thought about a given situation. Sometimes they did not make clear connections, but it is difficult to say whether they were unable to or chose not to. The paper Rose wrote for an education course focused more on anecdotal, descriptive details about her niece than on ways theories of child development might account for her niece's behavior.

What happens when students cannot lose themselves in personal details and must deal primarily with a text? What do they do when trying to accommodate a "pseudo-audience" such as instructors—"pseudo" because the writers know their instructors may have read the same articles or books, and yet the writers must decide how much information and what kind of details to include in their own texts in a way that is different from determining which personal information the writer cannot assume the audience knows? Two papers in particular required writers to react to texts without leaving room for personal "detours." Euphone's paper analyzed an excerpt from James Madison's *Federalist Papers*. Euphone had enjoyed the assignment and, despite some limitations of language related to idioms and syntax, his paper demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of Madison's ideas within a larger social context, focusing on what Madison had written rather than Euphone's own feelings.

Sandy's paper was an analysis of the relationships in Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sanchez* among the Sanchez family and the main Mexican social institutions, such as the Church, police and unions. Although Sandy focused on Lewis' text without bringing

personal feelings into her paper, she wrote more of a list of the various family members and attempted to describe their feelings about several institutions, rather than analyzing relationships or synthesizing information. She included a brief but rather unclear general introduction to the Sanchez family and Mexico. Then she provided several pages listing family members and institutions without demonstrating how the family represented social attitudes of its time. Her use of pronouns was confusing especially as there were so many possible referents in her text, given the number of family members and social groups which could be referred to as he, she or they. Sandy was dealing with a larger amount of information and a longer text than Euphone, but her paper also reflects a superficial understanding of a whole context and less focused writing.

Strategies

In 1984 distinctions had arisen from differences in strategies available to writers for handling concerns, and especially in the types of changes writers made or problems they experienced while composing. Two years later such distinctions were less apparent. On the whole, writers identified as more skilled during the earlier study continued to manifest many constructive composing strategies, and now were able to handle more complex discourse with greater fluency and confidence despite still making errors or reaching for words.

The writers brought such strategies to the texts they shared with me. Most of the assignments were relatively short, and writers did not appear to have much difficulty doing them; students wrote two-page papers in response to a relatively brief text (3 or 4 pages) they had read or a concert attended. They spoke of attempting to interweave personal response or understanding with knowledge gained from class discussion or a course textbook. Norma made use of her feelings for Socrates, her grasp of his situation and her world knowledge, comparing him to such historical figures as Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., to construct her defense. Kwong-Uie and Luc employed their newly gained knowledge of music and its terminology to describe concerts they had attended and their reaction to what they had heard. Euphone analyzed Madison within the larger context of a wealthy man trying to preserve his privilege by devising a system of representative government.

Rose and Sandy seemed to have a bit more difficulty, perhaps

because they had had larger tasks. Each wrote a longer paper and used more extensive resources. Although Rose observed her niece for the paper on child development, she also cited six references in her bibliography, among these Jean Piaget and Anna Freud. She had less difficulty observing and discussing her niece's specific behavior than she did integrating the reading into her analysis.

Sandy understood the connection between reading and writing in her assignment, but had problems acting upon it. For her term paper, she had had a choice of three topics and had chosen one she thought would be easiest: "This [topic] had a lot to cover and was easiest to write a 5-7 pages paper" (Brooks, 1987b, p. 27). However, it seems Sandy was unable to analyze and organize so much material. Furthermore, she had not heard the instructor say students were to mark the text while reading and she read in a hurry without doing so; consequently, she was unable to make specific references to the Lewis book. Normally, she needs to read twice when underlining in order to get a whole picture and determine what is important. She found *The Children of Sanchez* "long and boring," more difficult than a conventional textbook.

When the writers shared their texts with me, they had usually already made revisions which they were able to articulate. Euphone, for example, had reorganized the first two paragraphs of his paper between drafts because the first had not been "specific" enough and the "transition was not developed properly;" he is aware from a pattern of comments from instructors that he does not always express his ideas clearly, so he continually strives to do so. He ended his paper on Madison when he felt he had made the ending "level" with the opening. If he were to revise the paper further, he would improve the lack of citation and supporting evidence that his instructor had commented upon.

Most of these writers would not revise the texts written for other instructors, other than to rework sentence structure, as they were fairly satisfied with the content and organization, and instructors generally did not allow for it. However, Sandy did mention two aspects that she would work on. One was to include specific references to the book; she did not feel she had done the paper "wrong," but it was not "clear and detailed" because she had forgotten to cite the text. The other was that she would probably change the organization because "it's kind of boring to read it, paragraph after paragraph" (Brooks, 1987b, p. 29). I do not think Sandy, as a writer, has the strategies for reorganizing her text on her own, but it is important that as a reader she recognized a problem with its organization.

Instructors' Responses To Students' Texts

Most instructors focused on the content and organization of student texts over the language, unless language problems interfered with clarity. In general, they expected students to demonstrate in writing that they had understood and could use the information gained from a course or text, and actively think about it.

Euphone's instructor, a political scientist, was impressed by his ability to think politically about James Madison's point of view. He felt the linguistic difficulties in the paper were "minor;" also, Euphone's insufficient use of citation and evidence in the first paper of the semester were "common" writing problems which were "easy" to correct.

Similarly, Norma's (Classics), Luc's and Kwong-Uie's (music) instructors were generally pleased with the way these writers had fulfilled their tasks, in terms of the development and organization of ideas. Interestingly, Norma's paper had originally been given a B-/C+, which the instructor told me was "very reasonable" for him; however, after reading the paper again for our discussion, he said, "Looking back over it, I actually like it better now than I liked it at the time, I hate to say" (Brooks, 1987b, p. 30). It seems that its appearance (Norma's typewriter had broken and the paper was half-typed and not typed well, and half-handwritten) had influenced him as well as the number of papers he had had to read at the time. He now recognized that a lot of work had been put into it, and he enjoyed her "vigorous style" and feelings, despite "minor technical errors" such as spelling and punctuation, and the fact that she had typed "Socrates" in caps.

Kwong-Uie's and Sandy's papers drew the most serious comments in terms of problems, each for a different reason. Kwong-Uie had received a B+, a "good grade," because "this paper was so much better than his first" (Brooks, 1987b, p. 31). His instructor felt he was responsible, willing to learn, and the organization of his paper was equal to the level of many American students, but his level of skill in English limited what he could do. She found the paper "tedious to read because of the wrong words, verb tenses, and so forth" (p. 31). This instructor was the only one I spoke with who had actually met with the writer for conferences; the others usually said they were willing to and told students so, but students generally did not make appointments. In fact, her experience had been the same,

but Kwong-Uie had come to see her three times, which she explained as follows: "I think he's a fairly lonely guy. He said he doesn't have friends here" (p. 31). Her suggestion to him would be to get involved with English by reading, watching television and making friends; she appeared to view his problem as a language, rather than a writing, problem.

Sandy's history instructor, on the other hand, had not realized there might be a language problem. He had commented initially on verb tenses and lack of clarity in specific sentences; his end comment was "Your writing makes it very hard to understand your ideas—some of what you wrote is just plain wrong" (p. 31).

He did not know Sandy was a second language student; he had been struck by what he felt were a lack of understanding, perhaps due to not reading enough, and a writing problem. He thought her paper was somewhat off the question and contained incorrect information. He finds the writing of most students in the course (considered upper level) to be poor. If students basically copy from the text, rather than relating the reading to the larger historical context, he gives them a C, which is what Sandy received for her work. He does not feel he has time to meet with students, as his classes are lectures with 65-75 students in them, and he does not permit them to revise unless the grade is below C. If it were possible for him to have Sandy revise, he might speak to her regarding what he had expected and where her paper was off, in an effort to see what she had not understood.

I spoke to another instructor who was co-teaching Sandy's course, and for whom she had also written a paper. He allows students to rewrite papers after he makes some comments, because he acknowledges that an instructor's wording of a question may be poor. He felt Sandy had done fairly well, "not the best or worst" (p. 32) because, although she had some problem with organization, she had the idea, the "basic data."

Overall, instructors responded to what they perceived as sophistication of thought and grasp of material, as well as to the care writers took with their task. Some had given advice prior to students' writing, either orally in class or written on a handout; most did not see writers about their texts, nor did they allow for revision. Although instructors often had not known that a particular writer was an ESL student, they believe that ESL students in their classes are as good or even better than native writers, despite a second language problem.

IMPLICATIONS

In following up on these students in order to compare their composing processes, it was assumed there would be greater similarity among them after passing a writing assessment test and taking a freshman composition course. Since improving their writing had been essential to staying in college, I returned to these writers to learn about their development during the past two years.

How can the findings of this study help educators to retain ESL students and facilitate their growth, specifically as writers? The findings seem to make a strong argument for extensive support services, yet one striking point was that students do not always use the resources available.

Support services should be available after basic skills have been acquired, while students continue to develop what they may have only begun. Minimum competence in reading and writing is not sufficient for students; it may permit them to enter Freshman Composition and other courses, but may not get them through. Perhaps students who have demonstrated potential difficulties through patterns of repetition, withdrawal or failure (such as Sandy or Kwong-Uie in their ESL or English courses) should be followed more carefully and specifically required to use particular support services.

Despite being academically prepared for college work, some ESL students may not progress if they are isolated or lack social support. As a computer science major, Kwong-Uie only wrote papers for his English and core curriculum courses. He was not a self-activated user of English and had a poor self-image as a language learner; therefore, he felt he had little chance of succeeding in college.

As part of their coursework, students were asked to respond to a variety of texts for assignments. ESL professionals working with such students ought to include exposure to a variety of materials (or interdisciplinary perspectives on a given topic) in their courses, as well as helping students to develop reading and writing strategies for adapting to different materials. The assignments students are asked to do in college courses require forming connections between personal thoughts or feelings and readings. ESL instructors can help students learn how to gauge a task (choose a topic, manage resources, mark texts and organize information) as well as the infor-

mation necessary to provide a context for an audience, to develop and maintain a sense of the whole paper. In other words, instructors need to recognize that ESL students may not be developing simply as English language learners, but simultaneously as users of written language at higher levels of skill, such as analysis and synthesis.

Even when students had time to compose, they did not seek help. Professionals working with these students ought to find ways to increase students' use of available resources. We might find ways to explore their reasons and feelings, and try to accommodate them. How might professors or a writing center meet students' needs? Should some students be required to work with particular resources?

Furthermore, given that ESL students who had passed the writing exam and taken Freshman Composition still demonstrate linguistic and rhetorical problems in their papers for other courses, what are "realistic" expectations for exit from an ESL program? Perhaps ESL, English and "non-language" faculty members would find it mutually beneficial to discuss their language and writing expectations; joint seminars could be held to discuss the long-term development of all students and types of on-going support to offer students beyond establishing minimal competence.

Finally, discussing these students and their written work with colleagues, I became aware of several factors which seemed to influence their reaction; ability to think, organization and development of ideas, style, attitude and effort, and text appearance could outweigh or at least minimize limitations of skill in English. Since students did not often meet with instructors individually or have opportunities to revise, their written work might be a "one-shot" representation of who they are and what they can do. Greater communication among faculty members, perhaps through college-wide or interdepartmental seminars and small-group discussions, could raise awareness on both sides (ESL and non-ESL) of the overlap between language and content, and students' development as users of both. We might break down the tendency to separate students and classes along these lines and no longer expect one to happen before or without the other.

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